

Teens explore passion through projects

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Before their senior years, Allison Sidor didn't know her way around a sewing machine, Colter Schilling couldn't have told you about video-editing software and Heidi Jackson didn't know how to pick out a note on a piano.

Since then, the graduating seniors from C.M. Russell High School have sewn a prom dress, made a documentary and composed an original song thanks to their year-long senior project English class ? and they did it of their own volition.

"I did it because I wanted to experience something new for my senior year," Sidor said.

Forty-seven CMR seniors voluntarily participated in the senior project this year, English teacher Jamie McGraw said.

On Wednesday, the seniors had to make a presentation incorporating some aspect of technology in front of their peers and a set of community judges as part of their final for the project.

The whole idea of a senior project is fairly new to CMR ? McGraw introduced it last year. The senior project, which replaces senior English for those who participate, involves a fairly lengthy research and community involvement component.

"We wanted them to choose their passion," McGraw said.

For some students, that meant building a community garden, having a concert to raise money for the Children's Receiving Home or helping to build the Great Falls IcePlex.

The idea came to McGraw a few years ago after she watched Missoula Public Schools senior projects, which are mandatory for graduating students. She then spent a year researching and figuring out how projects work in other states and how they could be applied here. It's a voluntary program, but McGraw said interest is growing.

"We have over 110 kids signed up for next year," she said.

McGraw said students doing the project had to write a research paper containing some piece of controversy surrounding the topic they chose. They also had to come up with a product as an example of their research and create a portfolio that charted their growth throughout the process.

The students had to complete 15 hours of community service related to their project as well.

Finally, they had to make their presentations.

Sidor researched the media and its effect on teen lifestyle choices, which she incorporated into understanding fashion. She recently held a fashion show to present the different styles and looks women can wear to feel most comfortable.

She even made her prom dress, which took about 20 hours, and went on to make several handbags.

"The seam ripper and I became good friends," she said.

Schilling is a member of the Great Falls Americans hockey team, which went to the national tournament last year. He decided to make a full-length documentary about the team's season and competition at the national level. His community service involved working on the IcePlex, and his research paper focused on the persuasive power documentaries can have.

He said he spent six hours shooting video and "numerous hours" editing footage on two different computers. The result is a documentary he hopes will be distributed to hockey parents and could potentially be entered in a film festival.

"I wanted to do something originally to better myself," he said.

Jackson said one of the most important lessons from her senior project was time management. She's a busy gal and a good singer, so her original idea was to learn composition and write music to three or four of her poems. She ended up

with one song.

"I don't play an instrument," she said. "I had never laid my hands on a keyboard or a piano before."

The result was a love song worthy of applause.

"There were a lot of kinks," she said. "There were a lot of bumps in the road."

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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